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Excerpts from college students' ratings of their English instructor are presented along with some remarks about the usefulness of such ratings. Students' replies were concerned with the instructor's (1) knowledge of and interest in his subject matter, (2) effectiveness with explanation, (3) annoying mannerisms and eccentricities, (4) bias, (5) fairness in correction and grading, (5) honesty, (6) condescension, (7) prospects for recommendation or choice of another course, and (8) contribution to the courses. (AF)

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A GARLAND OF RATINGS, or, Just Try to Know Thyself

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PREFACE

Anonymous end-of-term ratings by students of their instructors comprise a worthwhile project that complements the traditional final examinations. While the tests uncover what the students have or have not learned, the ratings may hint at some peculiar reasons for the students' performance. Yet my experience has shown that instructors are reluctant to use the ratings unless required to by their department or college, and instructors are even more reluctant to discuss the results. Perhaps it is simply the end-of-term busyness that thrusts the ratings from their minds, but with the increased consideration of basing promotions and raises on effective instruction has come a searching for fair and suitable methods of evaluating instruction. As this Garland may show, student ratings are far from ideal, but they are, at least, useful to the instructor.

When the instructor passes out the rating forms, he should explain their purpose to the students: the ratings are designed to improve the course or its instruction; the ratings should be constructively critical; they should be frank - no one is going to be fired or rewarded because of what they say (we hope); they should be anonymous, preferably typed. The students should have enough time to complete them and be reminded to turn them in. Many of the students are flattered to be asked to rate their instructor, perhaps it also gives them a cathartic experience, and in any case, those who complete the anonymous forms would seem by that act to have shown some interest in them.

I have used two types of rating forms that were provided for instructors who wished to use them. One was a list of 16 qualities or abilities such as "voice," "enthusiasm," and "awareness of student needs and problems" followed by an A, B, C, D, E scale. The student simply circled the grade he would give the instructor on each rated factor, though he was invited to make further comment on the back of the mimeographed sheet. The second form was composed of ten questions which required the student to answer in his own words, and it also invited further commentary.

The first kind of form in virtually useless in that it provides no standard; for one thing, students in freshman or sophomore English have had few instructors, and yet they may be judging comparatively; but the rated instructor doesn't know how good or bad the students' other instructors were. If the students are judging on some absolute standard, what is it? And how does it vary from one student to another? One's A may be another's B--or E. How can one know and consider what each student's bias may be? Good students--or rather successful ones, ones who make the best grades--probably think the instructor also has been more successful in teaching than he may actually have been. One suspects that on the factor "Fairness in grading," the A student would tend to rate the instructor A, the E student to rate him E. Another example of the problem posed by this form may be noted with "Voice." A not-so-anonymous Spanish-speaking student found his Alabama

TE 500 315

instructor virtually incomprehensible, while a nearly deaf student was greatly pleased with her drawling instructor whose slow-moving lips she could easily read.

The rating forms must call for written answers, and the students who are really interested in speaking their piece probably prefer the written evaluation--witness their adding of comments to the first, simpler type, and their using triple underlining or some other such device of emphasis. The written type of rating has deficiencies similar to those of the first type, but details may, at least, be given; noncommittal, hedging ratings can be seen as such and disregarded; and the reflected quality of mind and character of the rater can help evaluate the evaluation.

The results are generally discouraging. Certain kinds of comments that are of dubious worth appear again and again. For instance, many students seem to think that the interest of the class is all important (or the interest of topics, essays, or discussions). And they emphasize peculiar details of little pedagogic significance; e.g., "Learn to say shouldn't and couldn't instead of shount and count." And their evaluations tend to be automatic rather than reflective, such as expecting in a second semester class the procedures and standards they learned in the first semester.

Naturally, other recurrent comments may mark important values or deficiencies. For instance, a number of similar responses to "How much interested in his subject does he seem to be" occurred in my business English sections: "I had the feeling that he was teaching the course because he had to." From what I gathered throughout the semester, I don't think he liked the subject very well and therefore did not seem too interested. It's a lousy course anyhow." Frequent comments such as these indicated an undesirable situation which was remedied when I simply stopped teaching that course.

But often the most valuable comments are unique or seldom repeated. For instance, this one comment indicated that, quite casually, I had gotten through to at least one student: "I especially liked your stressing the fact that we should take advantage of the cultural attractions which are featured here on campus." Another student constructively admonished me: "Throughout the course you have frequently been horified by the fact that we have not read THE books and THE poems.... A lot of us would appreciate knowing which books we should have read or should be reading. I'm sure that you would get a gratifying result if you would prepare a list (or simply make it a point to tell the students) of these books instead of criticizing." One lone student criticized me for my too frequent use of the easy-out grading symbol "d" (for diction); I recognized a valid criticism (from among so many invalid ones), and tried to mend my ways.

The improportionate value of the kinds of remarks makes the ratings statistically unreliable. Three students in one class were annoyed because I got chalk on my coat, but I didn't conclude that I had failed them. In other words, the ratings must be read with some common sense and a sense of humor. Otherwise one would go mad trying to reconcile contradictory evaluations of the same trait in the same class; e.g., one student found the instructor's analogies very helpful in explaining things, but another student was annoyed by the great number of them.

Perhaps the humorous and enlightening slips make the project most worthwhile; for instance, an answer to question 2: "He is seems very interested." In any case, here are the mysterious, the amusing, the tearful gleanings. Perhaps my shameless revelation of them will at least shore up the spirits of another student-rated instructor who may recognize a kindred soul. Names but

not spellings have been changes to protect the innocents.

1. How well do you think your instructor knows his subject matter?
   a. "I feel he knows his subject matter very throughly. Also he has an excellent knowledge of History which helps him simulate interest."
   b. "He had an even better and more thorough knowledge of poetry than most of the students hoped."
   c. "Good, Because He is only one who knows what he is talking about."
   d. "I believe he knows his subject thoroughly; unless you have me faked out completely, that is."
2. How much interested in his subject does he seem to be?
   a. "He seems to be very interested in his subject. Sometimes he even makes me interested in the subject."
   b. "I do not believe he was too interested in this course."
   c. "I think the instructor is as much interested in this course [business English] as he is in reading the Readers Digest. But I can see his side, because to instruct this course would be comparable to instructing basket weaving."
   d. "A lot more than I was interested in all that balony."
3. How well does he explain things?
   a. "Fairly well, when asked a question it is easy for whole class to get off subject."
   b. "I don't think there was anything to explain."
   c. "Very well--especially the background of authors and novel etc."
   d. [From same section as c] "Not well enough, I think he should give more background before we read."
4. What mannerisms or eccentricities of your instructor annoy you?
   a. "Some of the questions asked in class discussion annoyed me because nobody seemed tc know the answer."
   b. "He tends to be self centerd, and he is very contradictory and always cross examins the student until theyare in a state of confussion."
   c. "He grades a little bit too stiff for me."
   d. "I have no criticism of his manners because I am not perfect to say and one must learn to accept another as he is naturally and sincerely."
   e. "He's so handsome I can't bring myself to concentrate on what he is saying." (But she rallied on the final exam.)
   f. "It's annoying to see your English teacher riding a bicycle to class. Makes you wonder what you got stuck with."
   g. "His habit of rapping his leg over a chair. Also by allowing many wrong answers to be given before stating which is correct. It is confusung."
   h. "That he puts up with such radical and nonsense people that he is instructing."
   i. "Mr. Lewis never annoied me in any way."
   j. "This is the silliest question that I have ever heard of. I have had many different teachers who in turn had many funny habits. Tha last time I was bothered with habits concerning the teacher was in grade school. (I went to a catholic school.)"
5. How open-minded or biased do you find him in class or in conference?
   a. "He was very open-minded if you looked at everything his way."
   b. "He is biased to the point that exemplifies what he is trying to teach or creates an illustration that is hypocritical that helps get a better understanding of the material presented or discussed. I don't think he is always this way."
   c. "He is open-minded enough but a little too biased."
   d. "Biased on Teachers College students. But I hope he is just kidding."
   e. "He is 'bete noire' when it comes to conferences. He is prejudiced towards his own ideas."
   f. "Sometimes I find him a little on some of the subject matter."

g. "Fairly open-minded, only bias enough to make him an English teacher."

6. How fair and understandable are his corrections and grades?
   a. "I think he grade fair except he tends to lower a grade when you disagree with him on philosophies."
   b. "Hiss corrections are fair."
   c. "His corrections are good. His grading is bad."
   d. "It is hard to say about grading for sure until I receive my final grade."
7. How honest do you take him to be?
   a. "He seems to be fairly honest but I still am wondering about that grade I got a C- when I should have received a higher grade."
   b. "Don't know. I did not have to trust him with anything valuable."
   c. "He is probably as honest as anyone could be in a constant college atmosphere."
   d. "I have my doubts that he is as honest as he would like us to believe him to be. His language at times doesn't indicate a sheltered life."
   e. "He is honest, I am sure--but shrewd."
   f. "He seemes honest enough so that I would give him a loan if he asked me for it and I don't loan Money very much."
8. Does he tend to talk over your head or down to you? Why?
   a. "Sometimes--not very often."
   b. He does not talk over my head although occasionally I felt an era of correctness perhaps this is due partly to my feeling of inferiority."
   c. "Generally speaks on my level. Sometimes uses terminology of Greek gods which I know very little about."
   d. "Over our head, can not follow to well in discussion." (You can lead a horse to the well, but...)
9. Would you want to take another course under him or recommend him to your friends? Why?
   a. "I am not particularly fond studying literature."
   b. "Yes. I feal that I have learned something...I consider his views stimulatin, and my intrest in poetry has been built up some what under him."
   c. "No; because he teaches English.... For someone who is crazy about English he would make a good instructor."
   d. "Would like very much to take another course under him only english section in pulling cards is so controlled by graft and damned patterns that it is impossible to get in any desired English class."
   e. "Before answering this I would like to know my grade."
10. To what extent is the benefit you derive from this course dependent upon the instructor?
   a. "...He stirred me into the discussion at times."
   b. "I learned a few vocabulary words, and I sort of got a kick out of his being sarcastic."
   c. "The instructor was to me like a track to a train. The track guides train, while the train does the work. I'd say a train derives benefit from the track to a large extent."

Additional Comments:

   a. "Allows too much cheating on quizzes. (i.e. females)"
   b. "I think the English Department needs shaking up."
   c. "It seems that most English teachers are very odd in fact spookey, so it was a great enjoyment to have a normal person for an English teacher."
   d. "His jokes every once in a while help brake up the more boring parts of the course."
   e. "If the instructor doesn't like _____ as a state, why doesn't he pack up his Vocabulary Guide and the Organization Man and leave."
   f. "I reccommend that a better text book be use next fall."
   g. "If you made this up, it is satirical. If it came from the department, it is not very helpful, to you or the department. I've never seen anyone who answered one honestly."
   g. "This is a very poor way to evaluate an instructor."